

## ***CATCH Grant: Community Access to Child Health - Focus Group Executive Summary***

16 focus group sessions were conducted involving 217 participants representing various segments of Lewis County. Residents joined our facilitators for conversations about their experiences with childhood obesity, family health, and issues that affect their families as a whole. In each focus group, the value of talking together about mutual struggles was evident. Participants were able to learn from each other's stories and share information about community resources. Decision makers in our community will benefit from hearing the first-hand experiences of these neighbors and constituents. The results will be shared with local coalitions, legislators and others whose help is needed to prevent and reverse childhood obesity through policy and program work. The passages below summarize the prevailing themes from the focus groups and the surveys collected.

### **Barriers**

#### *Availability and Cost of Healthy Foods*

The cost of healthy food was a major concern for participants. Most groups saw cost as a major barrier to healthy eating. This discussion often led to sharing among participants about resources/outlets for nutritious food as well as discussion of what is considered to be nutritious foods.

#### *Personal Responsibility vs. Community Responsibility –*

Some participants felt that health and weight can only be altered by personal choices. A larger number of participants were adamant that the government and community should do more to assist people in their quest for health. Fingers were often pointed at the food industry (particularly the fast food and beverage industries), the government, schools, and employers.

*“When calories are posted on menus, or healthy foods are offered at events, it makes it easier to make healthy choices.”*

#### *Stress/Time Issues –*

All groups reported high levels of stress from long work hours.

For many groups this discussion flowed into the topic of emotional eating. Another result of the long work day: lack of time to prepare healthy foods, and inadequate time for instigating family exercise.

*“If I didn't have to work all the time, I would be able to cook for my family and find time to do more family activities.”*

#### *Lifestyle/Culture Challenges –*

Many reported that not all family members were on board with healthier choices in food and activity making it difficult to start changes. Some blame this on a change in culture from generation to generation; others reported that it was more specifically the culture of Lewis County versus the way of the area where they were raised.

#### *Built Environment Issues –*

Part of the discussion on community responsibility centered around the physical environment in which we live. Many participants felt that our communities do not support an active lifestyle due to poor sidewalk connectivity and increasing amounts of traffic speeding down the streets. They also cited neighborhood violence and fear of strangers as factors limiting outdoor activity. Gym

memberships were not an option due to the high costs.

*“Depending on where you live, there isn't a whole lot to do. There aren't many safe or sheltered areas to go and play or exercise.”*

### **Resources**

*WIC, ECEAP, HeadStart, Doctor's Offices, and Local School Districts –*

Many of the participants cited their childrens' early learning program, doctor, or school as a source of nutrition and physical activity information and encouragement. Most groups agreed that early childhood is the best time to teach healthy habits.

#### *Parks and Trails –*

There were participants in each group who raved about the beautiful parks and trails throughout the county. Many stated that they were accustomed to the weather and that enjoying time outdoors was easier with all of the safe and attractive places. This often brought up praise for local school parks as a place for family physical activity time.

#### *Farmer's Markets –*

Though they are only available during the summer, many

participants found them to be beneficial, although cost and access are concerns.

#### *Faith-Based Community –*

Several groups felt strongly that their place of worship was a source of support on the path to health. The examples were quite varied, including parenting classes, couples' date nights, and youth group education.

#### **Solutions**

##### *Community Center for Education –*

In response to the exasperation with cost associated with healthy eating, gym memberships, and organized sports, every focus group suggested a community center as a solution. A community center could offer low or no cost activities for local families. This would be a place to learn about healthy lifestyles, play or exercise in an area sheltered from the weather, and develop a support system and sense of community.

##### *Employee Wellness Support –*

Due to the increasing amount of time and stress associated with the work place, many expressed a desire for more support from their employer when it comes to health. Some specifically mentioned the need for worksite wellness programs and health incentives, while others just wanted a healthier work environment.

##### *Resource Guide –*

Several participants expressed concern over the lack of knowledge about what our community already has to offer.

Particularly when they learned of new resources during the focus group session, they often concluded that there should be a centralized way to coordinate and share information about all of the great things that our community has to offer to support health.

##### *Changes from Government and Food Industry –*

Though most groups didn't have specific ideas on where the change should start, they all felt that the government should do more to regulate and enforce healthier environments across the United States. They also felt that the food industry should be responsible for offering healthier food choices, improving current advertising and marketing practices, and informing consumers about nutritional content of food items.

#### **Conclusion**

The focus groups were a very rewarding experience for all parties involved. The community members were happy to be asked for their input, and excited to be involved in an effort to improve the health of the area. Connections were made, partnerships were built, and relationships were strengthened. The participants often left with a greater sense of empowerment; and many of them left with an increased awareness of issues associated with childhood obesity and increased knowledge of the best ways to incorporate healthier practices into their lifestyle. In this way, the focus groups provided information for our assessment and had a significant impact on the lives of the children and families involved.

#### **CATCH Partners:**

Northwest Pediatric Center  
<http://www.nwpeds.com>

Blue Earth Farms  
<http://www.blueearthfarms.org>

Lewis County Public Health & Social Services  
<http://lewiscountywa.gov/publichealth>

Centralia College – Child & Family Studies  
[www.centralia.edu](http://www.centralia.edu)

#### **Focus Group Participants:**

WIC, ECEAP, HeadStart  
Northwest Pediatrics patients  
Centralia College/TEEN Program  
Chehalis School District/PTO  
Parent to Parent  
Church Women United  
GoGirls Walking Club  
Lewis County Healthy Family Coalition  
Centralia School District  
Hispanic Parents/ESD 113

#### **To Take Action:**

Join our coalition!  
The Lewis County Healthy Family Coalition - for more information contact the Health Educator at Lewis County Public Health & Social Services:  
360-740-1234.

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